Convention
on Wetlands

Ramsar

Ramsar Advisory Missions: Technical advice on Ramsar Sites

The Ramsar Convention requires its Contracting Parties to designate sites as Wetlands of International Importance (or Ramsar Sites). In designating a wetland, a Contracting Party commits to maintain its ecological character. However, Ramsar Sites can face a variety of challenges, including developments in the agricultural, industrial, infrastructure, residential, tourism and recreation sectors; water management issues that affect water quality and quantity; invasive alien species and climate change.

Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs) help Contracting Parties and Ramsar Site managers respond to threats to the ecological character of Ramsar Sites. This Briefing Note aims to enable Ramsar Site managers to better understand the RAM process and its use.

Background

Contracting Parties requested that the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), through its work plan for 2016-2018, conduct a comprehensive review and analysis of all RAM reports to examine the lessons they offer to improve management and monitoring mechanisms and address threats to Ramsar Sites. They also requested that the STRP build on the results of the analysis to produce:

- A Briefing Note to help Ramsar Site managers understand the use of the RAM process and to highlight selected case studies; and

- A Policy Brief to help policy makers, within Ramsar Administrative Authorities, understand the RAM concept, the value of RAMs, as well as lessons learned on their effective application.

Purpose

The purpose of this Briefing Note, which builds on the results of the comprehensive review and analysis of all RAM reports, is to provide general information to Ramsar Sites managers about RAMs, including their history and use. The Briefing Note also discusses the benefits of RAMs, offers examples of effective RAM applications and explains how a Contracting Party can request a RAM.

Key messages

- The RAM is a mechanism through which a multi-national, multi-disciplinary team of experts provides technical advice to assist Contracting Parties (through their Administrative Authority[1]) to respond to threats to the ecological character of one or more Ramsar Sites and associated wetland issues.

- A RAM is part of a range of possible responses, which may only be initiated at the request of a Contracting Party, and which might impact the management of a Ramsar Site. It is not a compliance mechanism or a disciplinary procedure.

- Ramsar Site managers are key actors in the RAM process as they are aware first hand of issues threatening or affecting the ecological character of a site, and as such it is important that they are familiar with the RAM process and with the National Focal Point within the Administrative Authority of their country.

- A RAM may be requested in response to single or multiple issues (for example, a proposed development or a changed hydrological regime). The threat or threats can result from on-site or off-site activity.

- A RAM may address single or multiple Ramsar Sites, and also combinations of Sites managed collaboratively as Transboundary Ramsar Sites[2]. A RAM can also be part of a joint mission with other multilateral environmental agreements or intergovernmental agencies.

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1   The Administrative Authority is the agency or ministry tasked by the national government of a Contracting Party with implementation of the Ramsar Convention within its territory (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016 a).

2   Such Sites are made up of existing or newly designated Ramsar Sites, which are "ecologically coherent", extending "across national borders and the Ramsar Site authorities on both or all sides of the border have formally agreed to collaborate in their management, and have notified the Secretariat of this intent." (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016 a).

- A RAM produces recommendations addressed primarily to the Contracting Party, presented in the form of a report. It is up to each Party to determine whether and how to implement the recommendations it receives.
- The RAM mechanism facilitates the provision of neutral advice regarding challenges at a Ramsar Site.
- A RAM provides a strengthened basis for conservation actions and brings together stakeholders, including Ramsar Site managers, under an independent umbrella, thus promoting awareness and action.
- A RAM promotes action and helps raise the visibility of Ramsar Sites, wetland issues and the Ramsar Convention.

What is a Ramsar Advisory Mission?

The RAM is a technical assistance mechanism through which a Contracting Party may request expert advice about how to respond to threats to the ecological character of a Ramsar Site and associated wetland issues. The mechanism typically involves a site visit by a team of experts, coordinated by the Secretariat, who assess the problems, discuss them with stakeholders and prepare a report and recommendations. Formal guidance on the RAM process is provided in Annex 1 to *Recommendation 4.7: Mechanisms for improved application of the Ramsar Convention.*

The use of a RAM must involve a Ramsar Site; however, associated wetlands may be included that are not themselves designated, but form part of a complex or system of wetlands including one or more Ramsar Sites. Pursuant to *Recommendation 4.8: Change in ecological character of Ramsar sites*, priority consideration is given to Sites on the Montreux Record[3]. In practice, many RAMs involve Sites which are not on the Montreux Record.

Ecological character of a wetland

A key Ramsar concept is the ecological character of a wetland: "the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services that characterize a wetland at a given point in time" (Ramsar Convention, 2005). Countries are encouraged to maintain the ecological character of all wetlands, and are required to report any actual or potential adverse human-induced changes in a Ramsar Site to the Secretariat (Article 3.2 of the Convention). The Convention also provides for measures to restore lost wetlands and to compensate for loss of wetland values.

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3   Refers to "a list of Ramsar Sites requiring priority conservation attention" (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016).

A RAM may address single or multiple issues related to actual or potential change in the ecological character of a Ramsar Site. Of the 76 published RAM reports (as of December 2017), 27 focus on a single issue and 49 address multiple issues.

The primary matters addressed in single-issue RAMs include the impact of proposed development projects, water management, implementation of Convention provisions and mechanisms and the impact of invasive alien species. Proposed developments have included the following sectors: industrial, infrastructure, urban residential and tourism/recreational. Water management issues have included river-basin scale issues, changes to hydrological regimes and change in water quality. Issues related to implementation of Convention provisions and mechanisms have included Ramsar Site boundary restriction and compensation under Article 4.2, and potential removal of Ramsar Sites from the Montreux Record.

RAM 78 | **Addressing multiple issues: Parc national des Virunga, Democratic Republic of the Congo (2014)**

Parc national des Virunga is a Ramsar Site and World Heritage Site in the African Rift Valley. Its tropical ecosystems provide an important area for migratory birds and a significant concentration of wild mammals. A joint RAM/World Heritage Mission was triggered by oil exploration and illegal settlements by non-state armed groups, illegal fishing and poaching, and firewood and charcoal exploitation.

The mission team included representatives of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Centre and the Ramsar Secretariat. The joint mission recommended that the Government cancel all permits for oil exploration within the boundaries of the Site, and apply high-level measures to stop the illegal use of natural resources by non-state armed groups.

The Government successfully implemented the first recommendation, and the oil company ended its operations in the area. Implementation of the second recommendation was underway as of January 2018, with the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of the Democratic Republic of the Congo applying a plan to remove the non-state armed groups. A broad coalition of local, national and international NGOs is currently raising awareness for the implementation of the RAM recommendations.

How is a Ramsar Advisory Mission requested?

It is the Contracting Party, through the Administrative Authority, that initiates the process by submitting a request for a RAM to the Secretariat. A Ramsar Site manager interested in a RAM should contact the relevant Administrative Authority[4] to discuss the possible benefits of a RAM.

It is important to note that a RAM usually involves a considerable period of planning prior to implementation. It may require a significant deployment of resources and Secretariat staff time. As such, the mechanism is most suitable for addressing more complex, long-term issues.

RAMs have been considered by Contracting Parties a key priority in the last trienniums. If a Contracting Party is unable to cover the costs of a RAM itself, it will need to request external support. The Secretariat does not currently have a core budget line for RAMs, but Contracting Parties and NGOs sometimes provide voluntary contributions for this purpose or the Secretariat can help identify possible sources of funding.

What is the Ramsar Advisory Mission process?

A Contracting Party initiates the process by sending a request for a RAM to the Secretariat, which works with the relevant Ramsar Administrative Authority to determine the terms of reference (ToRs) and the expertise needed for the mission. The RAM is coordinated by the Secretariat and it is composed by a team of experts that typically conducts a site visit and prepares a draft report with recommendations. The report is submitted for comment

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4   To find the list of the heads of the Administrative Authorities within each Contracting Party, visit: https://www.ramsar.org/search?f[0]=type%3Aperson&f[1]=field_tag_roles%3A961&search_api_views_fulltext=.

to the Contracting Party before being finalized and published on the Ramsar website. It is then expected that the Contracting Party will follow up and determine whether and how to implement the recommendations. The Contracting Party is also expected to provide regular updates on progress, notably through National Reports to the Conference of Parties, updates on Article 3.2 for the Standing Committee, as well as through day-to-day contacts with the Secretariat.

Each RAM may vary with respect to the ToRs, duration, team size and composition, implementation, outputs and follow up.

The average duration of a RAM may be a useful guide when assessing the potential resource implications of a proposed mission. The average duration of the field-mission component (for which information is available) is approximately six days.

Most RAMs are conducted by a small core team. The average size of a RAM team has been three people, although it has ranged from one to ten. The RAM team has typically been multi-national and has usually been supported by a group of national experts of varying size and composition.

Several people or bodies may be involved in the RAM process, including the Secretariat, technical experts, the Convention's International Organization Partners (IOPs), experts and other Contracting Parties.

The Secretariat plays a critical role. Its typical functions include initial consultations with the Contracting Party and regular interaction with its Administrative Authority on all aspects of the mission; assembling and coordinating the RAM team; participating in the mission; contributing to and coordinating the finalization and submission of the report; and liaising with the Contracting Party during implementation and follow-up.

RAM 81 | Convening experts and stakeholders: Sistema de Humedales de San Miguelito Ramsar Site, Nicaragua (2015)

Sistema de Humedales de San Miguelito lies on the south-east coast of Lake Nicaragua. It supports a rich biodiversity, including a wide range of birds, fish, reptiles and mammals. The Government requested a RAM to provide recommendations for the maintenance of the Site's ecological character, which would be adversely impacted by the construction of the Nicaraguan interoceanic canal.

The mission, coordinated by the Secretariat, included experts in hydrogeology, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and aquatic ecology. The team met national authorities, academics, local community representatives and the consulting firm that had prepared the environmental studies for the construction project.

The mission recommended a more detailed and integrated analysis, weighing the social, environmental and economic benefits of the project against those of the ecosystem services provided by the Site. It also recommended a risk assessment analysis and the inclusion of mitigation and compensation measures. The Government has included the recommendations in the process of revising the EIA.

A Ramsar Site (or portions of it) may be designated under other international frameworks. More than 300 Ramsar Sites have a second designation, and 47 are the subject of triple designations (Schaaf & Clamote Rodrigues, 2016). Thus, a RAM may be conducted as a joint mission with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) or intergovernmental agencies. There have been 12 such missions, carried out jointly with UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the CMS Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds.

Potential advantages of joint missions include increased efficiency from the perspective of the Contracting Party, when related MEAs are seen to be working together at a practical level, and increased authority and impact of mission findings and recommendations. Other potential benefits may include increased attention to Ramsar-related issues among policy makers and decision-makers, the media and the wider public, as well as the sharing of costs. The reports of joint missions should always make clear which findings and recommendations relate to obligations under each MEA.

RAM 74 | Joint missions: Parque Nacional Cabo Pulmo, México (2011)

The coral reefs of Parque Nacional Cabo Pulmo on México's Pacific coast host noteworthy fauna, including five species of endangered marine turtles and six species of cetaceans under special protection. It is also part of a World Heritage Site (Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California). The local community has moved from fishing to environmentally friendly activities such as whale watching and scuba diving to protect the over-exploited waters.

In 2011, a RAM was requested regarding possible impacts of the Cabo Cortés real estate development project next to the Site. The mission team included representatives of the Ramsar Secretariat, UNESCO World Heritage Centre and IUCN. The joint mission addressed a wide range of issues, and the report concluded that not all indirect and cumulative impacts of the development project had been considered when provisional authorization was granted. It recommended that the authorities develop an urbanization plan to assure the Site's ecological integrity and restrict future large-scale tourism development in the vicinity. The project was canceled by the Mexican Government.

What does a Ramsar Advisory Mission produce?

RAMs produce reports with findings, conclusions and recommendations. The report's recommendations, which should be clearly linked to findings and conclusions, can vary in their number. The report's recommendations should also propose a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation. The report is finalized after the Contracting Party has had an opportunity to review and comment.

RAM 36 | Implementing recommendations: Ringkøbing Fjord, Denmark (1996)

Ringkøbing Fjord, a large shallow brackish inlet, was designated as a Ramsar Site in 1977 because of its importance for waterbirds. However, drastic declines from 1979 in waterbird numbers coincided with a collapse in the Site's submerged macrophytic vegetation. The Fjord experienced heavy eutrophication due to farming and the drainage of the delta of the main river (River Skjern) flowing into the Fjord, while varying sluice practices were causing changes in the Fjord's salinity. The Government added the Site to the Montreux Record in 1990.

A two-day RAM in September 1996 addressed the change in water quality due to eutrophication. The RAM provided a series of conclusions and recommendations. Ringkøbing Fjord is still listed on the Montreux Record; however, restoration and management recommendations have been implemented since the 1990s, and monitoring shows significant progress. Ecological functions have considerably recovered in terms of improved water quality, expanded submerged vegetation and higher numbers of waterbirds, including the greatest number of dabbling ducks in 70 years.

The RAM report is not an end in itself, but should be a step in a longer-term process. For example, the recommendations of a RAM report, if implemented, could facilitate a Site's removal from the Montreux Record. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Contracting Party to follow up and decide whether and how to implement recommendations addressed to it. An effective response to a RAM report requires national-level ownership. One means of achieving this might be to follow up the mission with a national workshop or similar process (which could still have participation from international experts) for translating RAM recommendations into a national action plan.

RAM 50

A step in a long-term process: Chilika Lake, India (2001)

Chilika Lake is the largest coastal lagoon on the east coast of India. The Ramsar Site is a biodiversity hotspot, and local communities depend on the lake for its fish and other resources. After ongoing degradation caused by siltation, increased salinity, invasive weeds, aquaculture impacts, hunting and pollution, the Site was placed on the Montreux Record in 1993. Following a committed management effort through the Chilika Development Authority (CDA), the Site was restored and an active wise use programme implemented.

A RAM in December 2001 reviewed the management actions undertaken and assessed the reported improvements to the Site's ecological character. It found that the CDA's monitoring and assessment projects had addressed many of the major pressures on the Lake, and recommended removing the Site from the Montreux Record, integrated management planning, participatory management, education and public awareness and monitoring. The Site was taken off the Montreux Record in 2002, the management efforts received international recognition, and the Site is now seen as an example of how to apply the Convention's guidance to ensure the maintenance of ecological character.

What are the benefits of a Ramsar Advisory Mission?

In addition to providing expert advice and recommendations about how to address problems related to changes in the ecological character at a Ramsar Site, a RAM can provide numerous benefits to a Contracting Party (see the box below). For example, RAM reports are publicly available and may serve as the basis for conservation actions at Ramsar Sites. Their recommendations have helped some Contracting Parties procure financial assistance from external agencies. While the mission's experts can indicate solutions to the problem, the independent authoritative nature of the mechanism can help break political deadlock and move those involved toward consensus. It can also help raise awareness about wetland issues and the Convention, as well as engagement of other actors.

The RAM mechanism is just one of a range of complementary tools and approaches by which Contracting Parties can address actual or potential changes in the ecological character of Ramsar Sites. For example, the Secretariat may suggest an ad hoc mission outside the formal remit of the RAM; provide direct advice, drawing on the extensive experience of the Secretariat and the large body of technical and policy guidance available in all Convention languages through the Ramsar Handbook series; or put Administrative Authorities or Ramsar Site managers in contact with appropriate experts including STRP members and IOP experts.

Strengths of the RAM process

- It provides an independent mechanism for addressing actual and potential change in ecological character at Ramsar Sites;

- It carries the endorsement and authority of a global intergovernmental treaty, yet is a flexible mechanism that can be adapted to particular circumstances;

- It provides action-oriented recommendations that can be implemented by Contracting Parties engaging different agencies and stakeholders from local to national levels;

- It may provide an opportunity to raise financial resources to support implementation, particularly in developing countries;

- It provides access to international technical and policy expertise;

- It helps increase familiarity with aspects of implementation of the Convention in countries that need capacity support;

- It convenes and engages stakeholders, thus helping to raise awareness and promote action; and

- It results in a publicly available report, building buy-in and transparency but also enabling Parties and other stakeholders to share experience and lessons.

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Authors

Gardner, R.C., Chair of the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and Director, Institute for Biodiversity Law and Policy, Stetson University College of Law, Tampa Bay, U.S.A.; Jones, T.A., Consultant, DJEnvironmental, Berrynarbor, U.K.; Pritchard, D.E., Consultant, DEP Consultants, Hexham, U.K.; Okuno, E., Foreman Biodiversity Fellow, Institute for Biodiversity Law and Policy, Stetson University College of Law, Tampa Bay, U.S.A; Stroud, D.A., Senior Ornithologist, U.K. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough, U.K.; Landenbergue, D., WWF International, Gland, Switzerland; Finlayson, C. M., Director, Institute for Land, Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia, and Ramsar Chair for the Wise Use of Wetlands, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, Netherlands; Dinesen, L., Senior Adviser, Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; Martinez Ríos del Río, L., Director General, Pro Esteros, Ensenada, B.C., Mexico; and Infante Mata, D., Researcher, El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, Unidad Tapachula, Mexico.

The Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands, also known as the Ramsar Convention, is a global inter-governmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. It is the only global treaty to focus on one single ecosystem.